

Supporting the first MCPON

An Interview with Mrs. Ima Black

Widow of GMCM Delbert Black, First Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy

In 1967, the office of the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy was created as a way to establish representation of the Enlisted Force at the highest levels in Washington. The first MCPON was selected from a broad range of candidates and had the responsibility of not only establishing the office as a credible force for change, but also setting an example to be followed. In the end, it was Gunner's Mate Master Chief Del Black, hailing from Oklahoma, who was a veteran of three wars, who was selected to be the first MCPON. His wife, Ima, stood by him for 50 years until he passed away in 2001. The following is a speech she wrote, detailing their experience during the selection period for the office of the MCPON, followed by questions and answers.

Birth of a MCPON, Remarks By Ima Black

"In 1960 the Navy was in trouble. Morale was low, enlistments were low, and Sailors were taking their discharge papers and going home at the end of their first enlistment saying that they were fed up with all the petty regulations, as they called it."

"Secretary of the Navy at the time, Paul Nitze, commissioned a retention task force to come up with ways to stem the tide. The committee was headed by an Admiral and personnel were encouraged to disregard the chain of command to tell their leaders what they were doing wrong."

"At the end of two years, after an overwhelming response, the final report reflected the views of 100,000 Navy men and women. More than 115 suggestions were approved, one of which was to provide representation of the enlisted force, in Washington. Someone who understood their issues, someone who had been there, done that, and could increase their prestige to provide a direct dialogue between enlisted personnel and the senior office. Someone who was one of their own."

"In 1966 a search began for what was to be called the Senior Enlisted Advisor. My remembrance of the process went something like this; commanding officers were to write a recommendation for qualified Master Chiefs in their command and the Master Chief was to write in long hand his thoughts and ideas of what he envisioned for the office and send along with it a full length 8x10 photo."

"We were stationed at Dam Neck, Virginia at the time, and my husband Del was the Chief Master At Arms. His CO called and told him that he was recommending him for the office. We talked about it and decided we had nothing to lose so he put together a package. Several weeks passed and one day we opened our Navy Times and there were pictures of eleven finalists selected from all the candidates. A few more weeks went by and another picture in the Navy Times had the field narrowed to four. At no time did we receive a letter or phone call informing us of this exciting news. Not long after that the CO called and told us we were going to Washington for an interview before a board."

"The board consisted of an Admiral, a Captain and a couple of Lieutenants. It seemed like a casual interview; however it seemed Del was being looked over from head to toe."

“Other than cursory greetings when I entered the room no one looked at me again or asked me any questions. We returned home and a few days later the CO sent for us. That was when we were informed that Del had been selected as the first Master Chief of the Navy, in November 1966.”

“We were told to keep the appointment secret until the public announcement was made on January 13, 1967, at the recruit graduation in San Diego, California. The same parade Del had been at for boot camp 25 years previously.”

“When we returned to Washington from San Diego, we were shown the room that was designated as office space for the new Senior Enlisted Advisor. This room was on the third deck in BUPERS. This exaggerated broom closet. There was a desk, a chair and an empty file cabinet. They turned to the newly appointed SEA and said ‘Master Chief, this is all yours!’”

“As best I can recall, there were two Sailors on staff, a First Class and another enlisted man. I don’t recall his rate. One of the first duties of the newly appointed senior enlisted advisor was an official visit to the Chief of Naval Operations. The CNO told him very bluntly that he did not think there was a need in the Navy for this office to which Del replied, ‘Admiral, this is what the men and women want. Will you give us a chance?’ He was told to go ahead and do anything he wanted. The CNO walked out of the office and was not seen again.”

“It appeared the rest of the officers in the Navy took their cue from the CNO as none came forward to offer any assistance or suggestions. Some were afraid the office would interrupt the chain of command. This never happened. Others did not think an enlisted man should have that much power. When he visited the ships the CO’s thought he was there to spy on them.”

“One day the office received a call from Robert Nolan, the National Executive Secretary of the Fleet reserve association. He asked Del what the Navy was doing to help him. Del replied not much. He asked if he would like to go to Capitol Hill and have breakfast with Representative L. Mendel Rivers, then Chairman of the House Armed Services committee.”

“Congressman Rivers was a friend of the military, especially the enlisted members. No requests made to him were turned down. One of the greatest changes he approved was to change the name of the office from Senior Enlisted Advisor to Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy.”

“When Del returned to BUPERS with the name change, he was told it could not be done because they had already ordered stationary with Senior Enlisted Advisor Printed on it.”

“Not long after that incident, Retired General Hittle, undersecretary of the Navy for manpower and reserve invited the new master Chief on official trips. He was also invited to travel with the secretary of the Navy. Although there were advantages to traveling with the SECNAV, Del always preferred traveling alone. There was too much time spent on pomp and ceremony and he preferred to be down in the Chief’s Quarters or crew’s mess drinking coffee and listening to what was really going on in the ship.”

“The day he was interviewed for the position in Washington, I was with him the whole time and no one talked to me once. As the Admiral pushed back his chair to depart, I spoke up and said “Admiral, may I say something?”

“Certainly Mrs. Black,” he replied and sat back down.

“After I had his attention I said, “I don’t know who you are going to select to be the senior enlisted advisor but as far as I’m concerned, my husband Delbert Black is the top enlisted man in the Navy.” I believed it in 1966 and I still believe it today.”

“There is and always will be only one First Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy.”

Q&A with Mrs. Ima Black

Q: You said your husband was a veteran of WWII?

A: Yes, he was in Pearl Harbor on December 7th. He was on USS Maryland. I didn’t know him then. His ship was hit, they went back into Seattle for repairs, then were brought back into the war and he stayed on the Maryland for four years.

I think one of the things that helped his selection as MCPON was his diversity in duties because he was there and he served on a lot of different ships and shore stations. At one time, what is now the Ceremonial Guard in Washington DC that was the Seaman’s Guard. He was in that. So I think all of the duties that he had gave him a very good reference.

Of course he was a Seaman at Pearl Harbor. And he joined the Navy in, I think April or sometime in the spring, and then was there on December the 7th. At that time when you went aboard a ship you had to take your turn at mess cooking. And so he was in the galley.

That was the era when nobody talked about it [the war] and my husband never talked about it, unless somebody asked him. And as time went by, more and more people became interested and we always went back to the Pearl Harbor survivor’s reunions in Hawaii. And we lived in Hawaii once to, when he was on the ship.

Q: He went to boot camp in San Diego?

A: Right. And it was very interesting that same boot camp that he went to in 1941 was where he became Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy at the review in 1967.

Q: The first office was small. “Not much bigger than a file cabinet,” etc. and they said ‘Master Chief this is all yours?’

A: Yeah, it was on the third deck at BUPERS, very small and I noticed where your staff up there now has got 20 people in the office. He had one first class then I think later on he had maybe two when he left and one civilian secretary.

Q: I’ve heard the CNO told him he didn’t believe the Navy needed someone in that position. Is that right?

A: Right, and that’s been documented. The lady that wrote the book about the MCPON she called him and asked him (CNO) if he said it. He said ‘yes, I said it.’ I believed it then and I still believe it.

Q: So he just said don’t cause any trouble; we’re not going to give you any help?

A: That’s right. When we had a Navy day ball and I gave that speech there were some retired admirals there and I thought ‘oh my gosh!’ And when it was over, one of them came up to me and he wanted to see if we could have that run in Proceedings. And he said ‘but of course we’d polish it up.’ When I got home I got to thinking about that and I thought, ‘polish it up?’ I know how people polish speeches up.

They cut them apart and it's not what you wrote. So I called the Master Chief in Mayport and I said if that admiral wants that speech, I don't want him to change it. It has to be like I wrote it or not at all. So I never heard from them and I don't really care, it wasn't that important to me.

Q: What were some challenges MCPON Black faced when he first took office?

A: I'll tell you something I been thinking about since I heard you were coming. My husband would have never told you this, if he'd been alive today. But I'm going to tell you. The senior officers in the Navy were not overly friendly to my husband when he was up there. And of course one of the reasons why was because they didn't think an enlisted man should have that much power. You know how many senior officers do you know that have an open door policy to the CNO? They just didn't think an enlisted man should have that much power, and maybe that's a little envy or something. And another thing, they were afraid it would usurp the chain of command. It didn't then, and as far as I know, it doesn't now. That was not the intent of it.

You just can't imagine what it was like not ever having a MCPON. Of course everyone knows it now, but it just took such a long time to get the recognition. You know the three or four years that I was there, I would go someplace where there was a gathering of Navy people and I would start talking to some enlisted men, just in conversation. "Have you ever heard of the MCPON's office?" They'd get that glassy look on them you know, they didn't have a clue. They'd never heard of it. So it took a while for the word to get around. Everybody now just takes it for granted.

Q: Could you give us some background on how you two met?

A: I was in the Navy from 43'-47. I got out in 47 but I still worked on the naval base at Anacostia. So I was 25 years old and I had some girlfriends. We were all 25 or around that age, and back then you were an old maid if you weren't married at 25. I mean the clock was ticking. So we went to this intra mural basketball game at Anacostia. We were sitting there watching the game kidding one another and saying oh I like that guy, I like that guy. So I said you know I like number 13, I like his legs. Well, I didn't know that he had a shipmate sitting in back of me so he went to my husband and said hey, you know that blonde that works over at the ship's store? And he told him what I said so he came over and looked me up. So that is a true story. Yeah, and I've told it so many times. That is how we met.

We were married in 1949 and seven months after we were married, he left and went to Japan, to the Korean War, and I didn't see him for about two and a half years, because there were no dependants that could go at that time. Then when they opened it up, it was President Kennedy; I was able to go to Japan. And I went over there and we lived in Yokosuka, lived on the base for over two years there. He was at the ship's repair facility and we went back over to Japan and he showed me where his office was.

He has another first. He was the first enlisted man as far as I know that was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. That's an officers' medal.

Something else that's different about him, you notice that all the other MCPON'S after him have the star. He has crossed guns in his, because that came about after he retired.

Q: What were some of the other challenges he faced?

A: He was a kind person, and never really said that much about it. I think this will give you an idea of what they thought about him.

This Navy Captain came in to his office one day and said 'Master Chief do you mind if I just call you Chief instead of Master Chief? And he said 'No sir, Captain. I don't mind if you call me Chief instead of Master Chief, that is if you don't mind if I call you a Commander instead of a Captain.' That was what they thought about him.

Another thing he didn't have that they have now is, you've got that staff up there, you know 20 or so people. Well when he had a meeting with anyone, like say for instance discussing the uniforms of the enlisted men he was alone.

I know once the VCNO had this brilliant idea that men should wear V-neck skivvy shirts, because he said it isn't nice for your chest to show. Well they just went to war about that. They had this big discussion and this Admiral and all his staff was hovering around him and across that room's table from him sat one person, my husband.

He never gave up. I could see him coming home and I thought 'oh boy here's tell of his day.' So what they finally decided to do was to have the officers wear the v-neck skivvy shirts, and they had them in stock in the Navy exchange but the enlisted men would not. Well it wasn't long before the officers were coming down to my husband saying 'Hey we don't like these. Can you help us get it changed?'

Q: What are some differences between the time MCPON Black took office and today, in terms of the job itself?

A: You were just aware of the way that people treated him. It was like that when there was a meeting for whatever reason, my husband and whoever was on the other side of the table. Admirals and their staffs or captains and so forth but he didn't have anyone and they didn't have the Force and Fleet Master Chief's then. That's who they call on now, you know if you have a problem in Naples, the MCPON would call the CMC over there and iron it out, but he didn't have that. What he did, he just did a lot of the leg work himself, since he had no one to help him.

Q: Tell me about the selection process.

A: There was a recommendation that they have an enlisted representative for all the services. The commands recommended Master Chiefs that met this requirement. So he was at Dam Neck, Virginia, and he was the Master at Arms, which, now would be the CMC. He was actually in the hospital. He had appendicitis and so the captain of the base called me. Then, of course, I told my husband and said why not what have you got to lose? So you had to get them an 8x10 full length picture and write "X" number of words saying what you think this office should mean. There is somewhere the letter that he sent in. So we sent that in, and didn't hear anything from anyone.

One day we picked up the Navy Times, which at that time was the Navy magazine. There was a picture of 11 men recommended as the finalists and my husband was in there. So we didn't hear anything for three or four weeks and there was another group of pictures that came out, three guys in it. My husband was still in the running so we said 'wow that's really something the top three anyway.' And then sometime after that, his CO called and wanted both of us to come to his office where he told us that he had been selected as the Senior Enlisted Advisor. This was in November or something. So what they were going to do was take the review in Great Lakes, January 13th, 1967, and this was to be a big secret. We weren't supposed to tell anybody. So we went to San Diego and did that, and then came back to Virginia Beach and eventually moved up to Washington. But they showed us some houses in Washington.

They took us to the Navy Yard and showed us houses at two or three different places. The old houses were at the Navy Yard 100 years old and our son, who was 9 years old, would have had a three-hour bus ride to go to school. So we said no we wouldn't take that and eventually bought a house in Springfield, Virginia.

Q: What were his first few months like?

A: I told you how they showed us the office. I was not up there for the first two or three weeks because we had to get moved. I just know that it was a rough time for him because everything he did hadn't been done before. Then one day, the executive officer of the Fleet Reserve Association called my husband up and asked him if he'd like to go to breakfast with Mendel Rivers from the House of Representatives. That was where they changed the name of the office from Senior Enlisted Advisor to MCPON. Then he gets back to his office and he gets a call from somewhere. They said, 'No I'm sorry we can't change the name of that office and the reason is, we've already ordered the stationary with letterhead that says Senior Enlisted Advisor.' So he called someone over at Mendel Rivers' office and, as you know, it was changed.

Q: What kind of changes did you see take place over four years? Did he ever settle into the position?

A: To begin with there were a lot things he recommended that were turned down. Then Admiral Zumwalt came along and there were some improvements. I don't know if he got credit for everything he did but I don't think it matters. One thing he did was to establish the first Force and Fleet master chiefs, you know the Mess, and they still have that.

Q: What were his feelings toward the end of his tour as MCPON?

A: I think he felt that he'd done everything that he could and he was very tired because it was just rough. I think he was ready to turn it over and let somebody else do it, but I think he was pleased with the things that he did. This was something so new, it was a slow process. I know he had no regrets, and he at least got it going.

Q: What is your strongest memory of that whole experience?

A: Wives played a very different role then. As you know, the [MCPONs] wife now gets her own orders, gets her own travel and this did not happen when I was there because it was that time in the Navy when they just didn't recognize the family. You would go to a Navy ball where the officers and enlisted were together and, when speaking they would say officers and their ladies and enlisted men and their wives. I heard that many times in introduction speeches. It was in the protocol book, actually. So I didn't really have much of a role to play, my part was just to be there for my husband and encourage him. I was somebody that he could talk to that understood, especially since I had been in the Navy. When he was in town I would attend a lot of the social functions, or official military functions. Nobody knew who I was.

Q: Nobody knew who you were. Did that work to your advantage?

A: Yeah it did. Another thing that was interesting because it was kind of funny, or maybe kind of freakish really. At the beginning when we would attend functions, people began to hear about the office and they wanted to see this guy. 'What is he like?' He would be completely surrounded by officers; they would be looking at him and asking him questions. I would be off in a corner with these Navy men sitting there saying, 'Hmm. That's supposed to be our representative? We can't even talk to him.'

And so what I would do, I would go up to my husband and I would say you have a phone call and I would pull him over to enlisted men, that's who we was there for. That's who he was supposed to represent. I did that many times.

Q: Your husband was a Chief's Chief, a deckplate leader. He never got away from that. How did he stay connected to that and not let himself get carried away?

A: I've seen that happen. Well for one thing, he was brought up during the depression, came from Oklahoma. So he knew that when he joined the Navy this would be his life, his ambition. Of course you know he had all of the experience and the training that he had prior to that and he just had a dynamic personality. He could sit down and talk to the youngest Seaman in the Navy. In fact he'd go aboard the ships and he'd always go down, if he wanted to know what was going on, he'd go down and have a cup of coffee with the guys and he could talk to them and make them feel comfortable. Yet he could stand in the White House and shake hands with Lyndon B. Johnson, and not be phased at all. He was just that sort of person. He was kindhearted, he was even tempered, and everybody loved him. There's no doubt that he was the right man for that job at that time.

Q: What about some of the candidates he competed with for the job?

A: I don't remember too much about them. One was a corpsman and one was a very nervous guy whose eyes darted every time an admiral walked in. He was not interested, just a big ego. And you could get a big ego there. It never caused my husband to get a swelled head from that.

Q: What about travel?

A: The SECNAV traveled with the MCPON because he realized that MCPON could find out things that he couldn't. The SECNAV would always be with the CO's and my husband would be down below talking to the enlisted guys finding out what was really going on in that ship. And then he traveled with someone from Congress, but when you're with them, there are a lot of ceremonial things. And so my husband would rather be doing other things than all those ceremonies. And my husband, he felt like that sort of tied him down a little bit. He preferred traveling by himself because he could just do his own thing.

Q: This position could have gone in such a different direction.

A: Absolutely! And I think that's why both my husband and I felt good and at peace with this because he felt that he had done everything he could to get that office off to a good start. And especially with the CNO telling him that he didn't believe in the office. So that's kind of rough to start on a job when your boss doesn't believe in you and doesn't have any confidence in you. It didn't deter my husband at all. It actually gave him more freedom to do some things.

Q: What was the extent of his interaction with Congress?

A: Well, he knew what the needs were. He knew what they needed in the Navy. Just like changing the name of the office and some of the pay. He knew what the needs were and what to ask for and they did help him.

Q: So he just kind of went in on his own accord and they worked with him?

A: Yeah.

Q: What were some significant concerns of the enlisted force in 1967?

A: One of the things was the pay, and another was the way that some of the enlisted men were treated. They were really treated like second class citizens, and they felt that no one cared for them and was looking out for their needs. They were just rather disgusted with it. That was one of many reasons why they created the office.

Q: So coming in with all those challenges, how did he deal with it?

A: Well it was overwhelming, and I don't know. I don't remember how he dealt with it. He just did what he could and a lot of recommendations that he made were turned down until later when they went into effect.

Q: Looking back now, forty years later, how have things progressed?

A: When number two came along we left there and went to Florida. My husband felt that he shouldn't be around going over to the office every day. And he didn't have too much involvement with it that first year. It's so wonderful that they do change the office every four years or so; they bring their ideas and think of a lot of different changes. They bring that to the office and make their own improvements. It overwhelms me when I go up there and sit in the office. And it is a respected office now; they know what it's all about.

Q: Do you have a favorite MCPON besides the obvious?

A: I absolutely do but I'm not going to tell you who.

Q: Like I said, there's been a lot of changes. Is there anything you think the office is neglecting or not doing now that it should be?

A: No, we're in a different time. There have been a few things come along that both my husband and I didn't accept, but eventually we do come around. But we're from such a long time ago. This was before the cell phone. We were up there one time and someone said, 'We were just wondering how you ever got by without a cell phone?' But when my husband was up there, sometimes he would just get so overwhelmed, just too much stuff, so he'd take the afternoon off and go play golf.

Back then you would arrive at a duty station and there was nothing there to help families, you were on your own. We got to Hawaii one time and I had on a wool red suit. I was sweltering. We had to go to all these buildings all over the base to check in and the Chief in there told him that he shouldn't have brought his wife along because we didn't have housing. Well they gave us concurrent travel, so my husband went off to take care of something so I sat down. I was sitting on the steps there with a lei around my neck so everyone would know you'd just arrived. So I was sitting there and this Navy Captain pulls up and says 'Welcome to Hawaii. What do you think of our base so far?' I said, 'Well to tell you the truth captain I don't think too much of it.' He asked me why, and I told him our situation. We went back into that same Chief and he walked up to that Chief and said find these people a place to live and give them my staff car to take them to it. It turns out he was the commanding officer of the base. So my husband comes back and I said don't worry we're okay. So they found us a hotel until we were able to get into housing. He was reporting to a ship, and he was there about a week with me and then he flew out to meet the ship and was gone. Of course now they have all of these different services and life for the family is just wonderful.

Q: That's all I have is there anything you'd like to add or anything you think I've missed?

A: I think I've told it all.

Recorded on January 23, 2007 at the Mayflower Retirement Community, Winter Park, Florida.